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HOW DO WE INVOLVE THE POOR IN WESTCHESTER'S WAR ON POVERTY.

BY- BECK, BERTRAM M.
WESTCHESTER COUNCIL OF SOCIAL AGENCIES INC.

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THE SPEAKER SUGGESTED THAT THE POOR SHOULD PARTICIPATE IN POLICY-MAKING DECISIONS IN ANTIPOVERTY PROGRAMS AND BE GIVEN THE OPPORTUNITY FOR EMPLOYMENT WITHIN THE PROGRAMS THEMSELVES. HE FURTHER SUGGESTS SOME OF THE POWER NOW HELD BY OTHERS SHOULD BE RELINQUISHED TO THE POOR, WHO SHOULD HAVE THE RIGHT TO HELP DECIDE WHAT THEY WANT. PRIORITIES FOR PROGRAMS SHOULD BE ESTABLISHED TO ACHIEVE THE GOALS OF INCREASED EMPLOYMENT, EQUAL OPPORTUNITY, AND INDEPENDENCE, WITH THE HIGHEST PRIORITY GIVEN TO JOB TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT. OTHER PRIORITIES SHOULD FOCUS ON THE PROBLEMS OF LEGAL SERVICES, SPECIAL EDUCATION, SMALL LOANS, DROP-IN DAY CARE CENTERS FOR CHILDREN, ASSISTANCE IN FAMILY PLANNING, AND THE ECONOMICS OF SECURING A DIVORCE. THIS PAPER WAS AN ADDRESS BEFORE THE ANNUAL WESTCHESTER CONFERENCE OF COMMUNITY SERVICES (12TH, WHITE PLAINS, OCTOBER 21, 1965). (JL)

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HOW DO WE INVOLVE THE POOR?

Keynote Address

by

BERTRAM M. BECK
Executive Director

MOBILIZATION FOR YOUTH

Before the
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HOW DO WE INVOLVE THE POOR

in

WESTCHESTER'S WARS ON POVERTY? *

This topic--the involvement of the poor in the war on poverty--is a phrase in the Economic Opportunity Act that probably has caused more excitement, more controversy, more name-calling and nonsense than any other part of what I consider to be a very significant piece of legislation. In the beginning, it was this clause in the Act, "the poor should participate in the maximum manner feasible," that prompted state governors to call upon the President of the United States and talk with him at length about what might happen if the participation of the poor were brought about in an improper way.

I suggest, as my first point, that if we really are going to be serious about involving the poor in the war on poverty, our first task is to rethink what we mean by involvement of the poor. For what tasks? For what purposes? And how will it be put into operation?

WHO REPRESENTS THE POOR?

There has been much talk all over these United States about who, indeed, could claim to represent the poor. The word "poor" has been used as a conglomerate--as though people without money have a great deal in common and constitute a group that can be represented the way you might represent, let us say, the anti-vivisectionists.

At the beginning, we must ask ourselves, "Who are the poor we are talking about?" When the President first announced the anti-poverty program, little attention was given to precise definition of "the poor." An annual income of $3,000 and under was used. But now that we've had some experience, I think we've come to a better understanding of some of the complexities of defining the group that we are going to try to involve in the program.

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* An address by Bertram M. Beck, Executive Director, Mobilization for Youth, Inc., before the 12th Annual Westchester Conference of Community Services, sponsored by the Westchester Council of Social Agencies, Inc., transcribed by the Manpower Development and Training Program from a tape recording made by Radio Station WFAS.

There are poor people and poor people. There are some people without money whose poverty weighs upon them in a very different way than it weighs on others, not too far away, who may have less money.

WHO ARE THE POOR?

Thus, when we say that we want to involve the poor, I suggest that we try to define "poor," not only in monetary terms, but in terms of the most desperate, the most alienated families within our community--the poor most desperately in need of change.

If we isolate the group we want to serve in this way, I think we'll find we are not only talking about families with low incomes,but also about families with very little education--families with very limited reading and writing skills. We'll be talking about many families without a male breadwinner. We'll be talking about families, and this is most important, whose parents were poor. And we'll be talking about members of minority groups who do not have equal opportunity, no matter what their income is.

The heart of the poverty program is not the new poor--the man who lost his job last week. It is the chronic poor whose parents have been poor--and often the parents' parents as well.

It is a fact that the rich tend to get richer. If you have capital in an expanding economy, the chances are that you will make more. But if you don't have anything to begin with, the chances are you're going to have less.

We all know the connection today between education and advancement. Two-thirds of all children complete high school, but only forty-five per cent of poor children do. If you take a bright youngster in a well-off family and a youngster of equal intelligence in a poor family, eighty-nine per cent of the bright well-off sons expect to go to college, but only twenty-nine per cent of the poor children have such expectations. Few of the twenty-nine per cent actually get to college.

INVOLVING THE POOR

Now, with this concept of the poor I have outlined, one possibility before us is that we might involve the poor in actual policy-making decisions--that is, in deciding which programs might be generated in cities and towns within this county.

The success of our wars against poverty depends upon such involvement at the policy-making level. To me, the anti-poverty program in the North is an articulation of the civil rights movement. In the South,

the strength of the civil rights movement lay in the fact that it arose from people affected by the problem, people who developed their own leadership. In the North, as we move to obtain equal opportunity for those persons to be served by this anti-poverty program, we need to emulate this important concept: that the people must do it for themselves rather than have it done for them.

POWER, POLICY-MAKING AND THE POOR

Why is this concept important? Because the kind of poverty we are talking about is essentially a question of power. You may say, "Well, it's a question not of power but of money; we are talking about people without money." But, I say to you that more important than money is what money buys. And what money buys is freedom to choose, freedom to do, freedom to get out of a tight spot. This is power, and the people we are discussing are relatively powerless. They are not a political bloc. There is no group of poor which votes as poor.

Usually in our society the poor are targets of helping efforts made sometimes grudgingly, sometimes with a full heart, by people who are not themselves poor, who are in decision-making roles--people with power. I think we need to recognize that this effort, no matter how well-intentioned, is in essence a disabling one. It has, at its very heart, the creation of dependency and the reduction of self-esteem.

If, in our society, we want to create equal opportunity more fully than has yet been accomplished in the civil rights movement, then I think we have do something that has been done rarely in the history of mankind. We have to willingly relinquish a certain amount of power. Social agencies accustomed to being benefactors, individuals serving on boards of social agencies, social workers, teachers, mayors, county executives--all need to begin to give up willingly a certain amount of power so that we can make a transition, without violence and bloodshed, to a healthier society.

Now, to give up power willingly implies that one would not be shocked by the idea that some of these poor actually would make decisions that he is accustomed to making.

This afternoon in your workshops you are going to discuss what you think is good for the poor. Maybe it is time that we had in this country conferences of poor, with workshops to discuss what they think is good for the poor. And their answers may be different from our answers.

RELINQUISHING POWER

And now, if one wants to consider that kind of involvement of the poor at the policy-making level, one would first have to consider the consequences in terms of public policy. We are content, I believe, to take public money, taxpayers' money--particularly in the anti-poverty programs, but that is certainly not the first instance--and have it spent by citizens who comprise boards of directors. But these boards are select groups in the population. Would we be content to have decisions made by the kind of people that I have defined here? Do you think they would make wise decisions, unwise decisions? Would they be wronger, if you forgive the terminology, then we are? Righter, just as wrong, or just as right?

My experience suggests that they are no smarter, no duller than we. They have no more imagination, no less imagination than we. But the target population of the anti-poverty movement actually could be involved at this policy-making level.

If this occurs, we give up many preregatives, and even a view of ourselves as knowing the answers. We don't say that because you have a disease, you can cure that disease yourself. It's nonsense to say that because you're poor, you know how to cure poverty. But we do say that perhaps the people whom this program is designed to help may know just as much about how the money could be well spent as do their neighbors from a more favored community.

In saying this, we say a great deal to the population to be served. We say: you really are participants in this democratic society. You are not just targets that someone is going to do something for, or to. You are partners in this, with full say. You are not instruments or tools or statistics to be figured about, talked about, done for, done to. You supply what I think is the fundamental rung on the ladder out of poverty.

Now, if one wants to take the chance and do this, one has to face the danger, first, of tokenism.

SELECTING THE POOR FOR POLICY-MAKING

In New York City, when this issue was discussed, it was decided that one-third of the committee or board must be composed of the poor. Yet, arithmetic doesn't provide the whole answer. One also has to be concerned about how these people are to be selected. It is very easy to select a group of people, with incomes of less than $3,000 per family of four, which would reflect what we would do if we were on that committee.

In Philadelphia and in New York, there has been experimentation with the concept of a poor neighborhood electing its own people. While these experiments have been disappointing more often than heartening, there is a way. On the Lower East Side of New York City,we are not having merely an election in which the persons who are to be benefitted by this program are expected to behave like middle or upper-class people--to come out to vote, or come to meetings as you and I do.

Block-by-block, over a six-month period, we have been holding discussions about the question of power in the anti-poverty program, leading toward an election that will take place six months from today with--we hope--an informed electorate.

The involvement of the poor at a policy-making level is, to me, the most significant possibility within the poverty program. It is also the most unusual and the most difficult, and carries the greatest threats. To involve the poor, we have to change what we think of ourselves and to challenge the people we serve to think for themselves. We also pose a great challenge to ourselves.

A second type of involvement is much less controversial and easier to consider than involvement of the poor in policy-making decisions. This is participation of the poor in the actual programs launched as part of this war on poverty. The professionals--lawyers, social workers, teachers and vocational counselors--functioning in this program become, finally, not masters of the poor but, rather, servants of the poor. If you give the poor the power to decide where the money is to be spent, the people who are then employed in the program become the servants of the poor in fact, not just in theory. There is necessarily a partnership between the technological skill of social welfare personnel, civic volunteers, teachers, lawyers, and the poor. Merely giving the poor the power to say where the money goes is empty power unless technological ideas are produced on how one extends ladders down into pockets of poverty, enabling people to climb upward.

PRIORITIES NEEDED

The sine qua non of the program is that there shall be priorities on what is most important to enable people to climb out of poverty. All over the country, the wars on poverty flounder, because they become merely sources of funds enabling existing public and voluntary agencies to extend the programs they have been operating ad infinitum--programs which never have reached this population we're talking about, and never will.

Unless we have the second dose of courage to set some priorities, our war will become, in fact, the same defensive operation as always, except that there will be a little money for it. And, unfortunately, some of the great fights that go on in the so-called war on poverty actually are fights between power interests--fights between different levels of government, wherein one level wants to conduct a program not necessarily to bring programs closer to the people, but because one level doesn't want to see another gain power. That is not a basis on which an issue should be decided--nor are fights between voluntary agencies over who is to get the money.

Most essential, after we have given the poor this policy-making role willingly, is the establishment of a priority. What do we really want to do?

The aim of an anti-poverty program in our society is simple: to help people earn a living, become independent and have the dollars that mean power. First priority must be given to all training programs to get people into jobs. We will train them for jobs, or we will create jobs, and they will have jobs. Each program must be monitored in terms of the target population, because a great danger exists for all of us who conduct these programs: we will want to make a good showing. Instead of serving the lowest poor--the people most put upon, the youngsters who are not really going to show up for work on time, and if you send them out to an employer and they get a job, they won't hold it more than a month--there is a terrible temptation to serve just a few notches above--the youngster who almost could make it on his own. In this way, we have a good record and can say, "Oh, we had 500 youngsters come in and 500 are now placed on jobs." Well, I say, all of these programs must be monitored constantly in terms of a defined target. Which families do you hope to serve, and are you serving them? Otherwise, inadvertently, we konk out by serving the easiest rather than the most difficult.

Second in priority are those programs that will provide education leading to a job. All other programs, to be defended as legitimate parts of an anti-poverty operation, must demonstrate that they lead toward self-sustaining participation in the economy. A test is essentially this: I said to you before that money was power and that one of the things that makes the rich or the middling-rich different from the poor is that they have the dollars to take care of themselves when they meet the crises of life. So, if we want to help the poor, we must use tax dollars to give them some of the power the rich and middle-income people have; we must help the poor to become full participants in society.

LEGAL SERVICES FOR THE POOR

One ingredient is the right to legal counsel. In Mobilization for Youth, we have found this ingredient to be very important. You and I, when we feel our rights are denied, go to a lawyer. The poor, generally speaking, have no such opportunity. Yes, they have legal aid or public defenders if they are hauled before a judge.

But, I'm talking about the client of the Department of Welfare. We have structured in our society, of necessity, giant bureaucracies that are the essential helpers of the population we want to serve. They are conducted, by and large, by good persons trying to do a good job. But who wants to live at the mercy of a representative of the best Department of Welfare in the world, however merciful? Is it not natural that the poor perceive the welfare worker,who gives or withholds, as an arbitrary instrument of a society from which they are alienated?

In the tiny area where we (Mobilization for Youth) operate on the Lower East Side, we provide free counsel, and we get into a lot of fights about it. So again, if you want to do this, you must be prepared to get into fights. For example, our lawyers file, with our City Department of Welfare, applications for fair hearings. Most often, before the hearing is even held, the client is given--and this causes us some grief for legal reasons--what we are seeking. Our lawyers deal with our Police Department, with our District Attorney on allegations of police brutality. They deal with our Housing Department.

I, myself, come fresh from a long telephone battle with the executive of one of the fanciest adoption agencies in the City of New York. The issue was this: a young woman had a child out-of-wedlock. She placed the child with the agency, but not for adoption. The woman decided she wanted the child back. She went to the agency, but the agency was not ready to relinquish custody. The woman then came to our lawyer. The adoption agency executive was up in arms and said that there were several reasons why the woman should not have her child back. They were good reasons, and, I'm sure, if I put them before you, you would agree with the agency executive. The agency executive asked me, "Why do you provide this woman with a lawyer?" The answer is that I believe that the woman has the same right as a middle or upper-class person to go to court of her own volition with her lawyer to fight for her child, regardless of how much I agree with the agency.

TOLERANCE OF CONFLICT NEEDED

So again, this illustrates that if the war on poverty is to be successful, there must be tolerance of conflict. I would say that it is a better Department of Welfare when clients have an outside agent to turn to. And if there are fights, if there is discomfort--as there would be because people, heretofore submissive, heretofore instruments, not people, would have their say or stir things up--if there be friction, then we must say that out of this friction will come a better community. And turning our backs on these people, depressing them, doing good for them so long as we keep the power of decision, is not going to lead to a better society.

A related point in our own social work efforts in Mobilization for Youth: we have found that the service we give must be what we call an advocacy service. If we want to serve the poorest people who live on the Lower East Side--it's a poor neighborhood to begin with, and we do serve the poorest twenty per cent--we must deliver the service they want. They're sick of promises, they don't believe in abstractions and they're not there to talk. In the storefronts in which we operate, our social workers are advocates. Clients come in always in crisis. The eviction notices come; the husband has been arrested; they have been thrown off welfare. The social worker needs to stand by these people and take their part. If you are dependent for life and death decisions on giant public or voluntary agencies, and you are limited in the use of the language as many of our clients are, and you don't quite know how to stand up and fight your own battles, you need to be taught. Thatis the most valuable service the poor need as a substitute for dollars.

SPECIAL EDUCATION NEEDED

The middle-class or rich mother whose child can't make it in the public school system selects a private school. We may need educational structures outside the conventional public school system to bring up to par the children of the poor, who are really at the heart of a big problem. Often the public school system cannot change quickly enough to meet the needs of these youngsters.

Today, the emphasis on Operation Head Start--which I think was a terrific program--and the emphasis on pre-kindergarten training are ways of saying, "You know, the trouble with these youngsters is that their families don't have books on the shelves; adults don't encourage education; these youngsters are culturally deprived, so we'll give them an injection of culture and then put them in the regular system where they'll take hold." Well, I say, "Nonsense."

Head Start is fine, and pre-kindergarten is fine, but the heart of the matter is what happens in the public school system, and if the public school system isn't able to educate these children, then we must change that system rather than look at the families and say that if they read the right books, the children would be easier to educate. I tell you that many of the children going to school in my neighborhood on the Lower East Side would not be culturally deprived if they had the benefits of some of the school systems you have in Westchester, and it may well be true that some of the children going to the schools that serve the poor in Westchester would be less deprived if they went to the schools that serve middle-class children. If we want to give parents of poor children the opportunities that could be bought with monies that they don't have, we had better consider some special educational facilities--either within the public school systems or outside--to bring these children what they need.

SMALL LOAN PROGRAM NEEDED

Take a topic like small loans. If you have a little money in the bank and your wife gets the flu, or your wife is ill and has to be hospitalized, you can hire someone to take care of the children. If you live at the margin of poverty, and that's true of many people in the communities we're talking about, the difference between near-poverty and poverty may be the flu. One crisis can drain your resources, uselessly. The inability to get someone to take care of your children may cause you to lose your job. Over and over again we find that one of the most difficult problems in helping people on the Lower East Side contend with an emergency is that they cannot take time off from jobs, they cannot lose the pay, and that when they must lose their income, they have nothing to sustain them except high-interest finance organizations seeking to make a buck from desperate people. So, why not a small loan program charging little or no interest?

DROP-IN DAY-CARE CENTERS NEEDED

We find we need on the Lower East Side--and I'll bet you need the same in some communities in Westchester--drop-in day-care centers. A mother with some money, who has to go to a doctor, may ask a maid, a relative, or a baby-sitter to look after her children. Mothers in the families we serve, that you'll serve, have no such resources, however. Sometimes there is no pre-natal care, simply because the mother couldn't get out of the house. We need, therefore, a center--we have one of them operating--where a mother can leave a child for two or three hours--witho. of

application and intake. A drop-in day-care center does for the poor what rich or middle-class people can do for themselves.

FAMILY PLANNING

Take family planning. You know, in some of our psycho-therapeutically oriented agencies, emphasis still remains on the idea that the way we're going to help the poor is to help them with their psychological problems, with their feeling about their problems. The rich have no monopoly on neuroses. But I mention this in connection with family planning, because there are those of you who are, like me, hip on psycho-analytical theory. You know that great emphasis is placed on the question of whether a mother wants a child; and in psycho-therapeutic endeavors, people often are dealing with the consequences of whether or not the mother wants the child. Well, did you know that the question of whether or not the mother wants a child is related to income? That, according to the Greenley Associates Survey, ninety per cent of mothers on aid to dependent children in Chicago said that they did not want their last child? That, as you go to the poorer families, seventeen per cent of white low-income mothers and thirty-one per cent of the low-income non-white mothers did not want the last child before the child was born? As you go down in educational level, which means as you go down in income level, you get the figures going higher and higher--thirty-two per cent, forty-three per cent. Now, why is it that such large percentages of poorer mothers did not want their last child? Well, sometimes they did not have the same opportunities for family planning available to middle or upper-class mothers.

I'm not saying that we should decide what these people need and give it to them. I'm only saying that here are some programs that make technological sense and need to be placed before these people for them to make a selection. I'm saying that these people need essentially the same privileges that money can buy, so they can begin to climb up the ladder in our democracy and partake of benefits now beyond their reach.

DIVORCE IN RELATION TO INCOME

Now, take a question like divorce. Maybe some people would not consider that divorce is related to money. Yet, in our own New York State, someone with $300 can easily make it to Mexico or Nevada where divorce is simple. But, if you happen to have no money, there's no way to get a divorce; so instead, you are driven to informal means of terminating marriages that then excite great public disdain. Well, here again is an opportunity that must be opened up for people at <u>all</u> income levels.

EMPLOYMENT OF THE TARGET POPULATION

The opportunity for self-esteem, probably the most important opportunity brings me back to my first point. I have listed for you programs that I think we should develop for consideration of people who suffer from the problems that we're trying to cure. And this, I think, is our job.

Last, we must consider the question of involvement of the poor in terms of work within the anti-poverty programs we need to develop. As automation closes off opportunities for industrial employment in increasing numbers, we need to develop new areas within the welfare and public sector, using the very people we're trying to serve. Let me tell you about one of them. At Mobilization for Youth, we employed as teacher-helpers, seventeen-year-old school dropouts actually help youngsters in kindergarten and the first grade in language readiness. You would be amazed and delighted if you could have met the youngsters who participated in this program. Their whole view of school changed. School no longer was the enemy; they identified with the teacher. The teachers loved it, because these youngsters really were useful. They were not only hanging up coats or taking off leggings; they were doing a responsible job with dignity--and it meant something to them.

In the same way, we employ members of our target population in community development and in actually giving social work services. We are trying to remove one boundary that has kept the poor ghetto-bound--the burgeoning professionalism that has caused so many positions to be shut off by "guild qualities."

There are many things that poor people can do, and I'm not talking about taking a child to the clinic, or doing the little things that the professionals don't want to do. I'm talking about important jobs at the heart of the program. I'm saying that many of the people we want to serve can help one another and help themselves, if we would dare to let them try.

I'm saying that a third way to involve the poor is to give them jobs within their own program, following through on what they have elected to do. A war needs a central strategy, and in these remarks here today, I've suggested to you that embodied in the Economic Opportunity Act are dynamics that can be used in a healthy way--the possibilities of actually involving in a welfare program not just the planners and the people who deliver the services, but the people who are to receive the services.

Placing clients, customers, at the policy-making level must be done in programs. Services must reach the people we're trying to serve, and this can be done by employing these very same people in the program.

To me, the great opportunity that lies before us is to make significant social change in America by eliminating, in time, these pockets of poverty, or at least substantially reducing them, and to bring about a transition in our society, a healthy transition--even though it has lots of headaches, a healthy transition--in a world where economic and educational opportunities will become a reality for all people.

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